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AUTHOR Evans, Nancy J.; Dovido, John F.
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ABSTRACT

Social stereotypes appear to play a role in social cognition similar to the role proposed for prototypes in nonsocial information processing. To explore whether racial primes would differentially facilitate response to positive and negative evaluative words, 32 male and female white college students were presented with a black or white prime and asked to make decisions about evaluative words not associated with traditional racial stereotypes. Results were generally consistent with Brewer's (1979) conclusion that intergroup bias is frequently characterized by in-group favoritism rather than by out-group derogation. White subjects responded more quickly to positively rated words after a prime of white than after a prime of black, suggesting that a favorable evaluation, along with traits rated stereotypically white, is part of the representation of the white category. Response to negative traits showed no significant speed differences after white or black primes. The findings indicate that positive attributes come to mind more quickly when thinking of whites. While associations with blacks are apparently no longer negative, racial bias associated with stereotyping continues to exist. (JAC)

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Evaluative Processing of Racial Stereotypes

Nancy J. Evans
University of Pittsburgh

and

John F. Dovido
Colgate University

CG 017494

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Paper presented at the 54th Annual Meeting of the Eastern Psychological Association, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, April 1983.

Short Abstract

(1) Title

Evaluative processing of racial stereotypes

(2) Authors

Nancy J. Evans and John F. Dovidio, University of Pittsburgh and Colgate University

(3) Sponsor

None (Authors are members.)

(4) Abstract

Racial category primes were presented before positive and negative evaluative traits. Suspects responded more quickly to positive traits after a "white" than after a "black" prime. No differences associated with prime were obtained for negative traits, suggesting that the evaluative component of contemporary racial attitudes is becoming less overtly negative.

(5) Topical Session Preference

General: Social

Specific: Social Cognition

Person Perception

(6) Slides

Will be used

(7) Mailing Address:

Dr. Nancy J. Evans

727 LIS Building

University of Pittsburgh

Pittsburgh, PA 15260

Telephone: (412) 624-5514 (Office) or

(412) 681-9127 (Home)

Full Abstract

(1) Title

Evaluative processing of racial stereotypes

(2) Topical Session Preference

General: Social

Specific: Social Cognition, Person Perception

(3) Problem or Major Purpose

Social stereotypes appear to play a role in social cognition similar to the role proposed for prototypes in nonsocial information processing (cf. Cantor & Mischel, 1979, Hamilton, 1979). Rosch (1975a) has argued that prototypes, typical members of natural categories, serve as "cognitive reference points" and mediate information processing. This view of the structure and processing of object categories is nicely supported by Rosch's priming experiments (Rosch, 1975b). Specifically, Rosch finds that following a category name prime (e.g., fruit) reaction times to good members that well match the prototype (e.g., apple) are significantly facilitated, while responses to poor members (e.g., kumquat) are much less facilitated. (Refer to Figure 1.)

We have attempted to apply Rosch's approach for the study of object categories to the study of social categories. In a previous study (Evans & Dovidio, 1982), we presented racial categories (black, white) as primes and stereotypic traits (e.g., musical, intelligent) as test words. As shown in Figure 2, subjects responded more quickly to white stereotypic traits following a "white" prime than following a "black" prime. Likewise, reaction times to black stereotypic traits were faster after the "black" prime than after the "white" prime.

Unlike many prototypes for object categories, however, social stereotypes also generally include strong affective and evaluative components (Fiske, 1982).

Consequently, in the present research we explored whether racial primes would differentially facilitate response to positive and negative evaluative words. In particular, after being presented with a "black" or a "white" prime, subjects were asked to make decisions about words that were clearly evaluative but were not associated with traditional racial stereotypes. Since positive characteristics have traditionally been more strongly associated with whites than with blacks (Karlins, Coffman, & Walters, 1969), we expected faster reaction times to positive evaluative traits (e.g., good) after the "white" prime than after the "black" prime, even though these words were not explicitly part of the stereotype. What can we predict for negative evaluative traits? Recent evidence suggests that while white college students ascribe positive qualities directly to whites, they do not directly ascribe negative traits to blacks (Karlins et al., 1969). For example, Gaertner and McLaughlin (in press), using both rating scale and reaction time (Meyer & Schvaneveldt, 1971) techniques, found that although positive stereotypic characteristics like intelligent and ambitious continued to be more strongly associated with whites than with blacks, negative stereotypic traits like stupid and lazy were not more highly associated with blacks than with whites. Given these data on the contemporary nature of racial attitudes, we expected no differences in reaction times to negative evaluative words (which were not explicitly part of traditional racial stereotypes) under the two priming conditions.

(4) Subjects

Sixteen white male and sixteen white female Colgate University undergraduates served as subjects as part of a course requirement.

(5) Procedure

The stimuli consisted of words presented either as primes or as traits. Three primes were used (white, black, and the neutral prime of house) and each

was paired with 60 trait words. Based on the results of a pilot study, 30 of the trait words are commonly judged to be reasonable descriptions of a person (e.g., responsible), while the other 30 words do not meaningfully describe a person (e.g., metallic). Included in the set of person-descriptives were ten words that load highly on an evaluative dimension (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1981), but which have not been associated with traditional stereotype descriptions of blacks and whites. The five positive evaluative terms were responsible, trustworthy, good, important, and kind; the five negative traits were irresponsible, untrustworthy, bad, unimportant, and cruel. Ratings (+2= very favorable; -2= very unfavorable) by subjects from our pool confirmed the selection of these positive (M=+1.35) and negative(M=-1.49) evaluative items.

Subjects were seated individually in front of a projection screen and a response keyboard. Each subject received 180 trials, a random arrangement of the 3 primes and the 60 trait words. On a particular trial, a subject saw a prime (e.g., black) for 2 seconds. The prime was then removed and the screen was blank for 500 msec. The trait word (e.g., good) then appeared and stayed on until the subject hit a response key. Subjects were instructed to read the prime and to think about a typical member of that group. They were told to then read the trait word and to respond as quickly and as accurately as possible whether the characteristic named could ever be true of the group (YES key) or if it were always false (NO key).

(6) Results

The error rate was low (5%), and the few errors which did occur were distributed fairly evenly across the experimental conditions. Since there was no evidence of a speed-accuracy tradeoff, response speed was analyzed as the dependent variable. A repeated measures analysis examining the factors of prime type (black, white) and trait type (positive evaluative, negative evaluative)

revealed the predicted Prime X Trait interaction, $F(1,31)=8.81$, $p<.01$. Specifically, as illustrated in Figure 3, subjects responded more quickly to positive evaluative traits following a prime of white than following a prime of black, M's=767 vs. 908 msec ($p<.001$). For negative evaluative traits, there was no significant difference between priming conditions ($p>.50$). Response to negative evaluative traits was only slightly faster after the black prime than after the white prime, M's=885 vs. 891 msec.

(7) Implications and Conclusions

In general, our results are consistent with Brewer's (1979) conclusion that intergroup bias is frequently characterized by in-group favoritism rather than by out-group derogation. We found that white subjects respond more quickly to positively rated words after a prime of white than after a prime of black. These evaluative words are not explicitly part of the stereotype, yet they are quickly "referenced" from the category name. This suggests that a favorable evaluation, along with traits rated stereotypically "white" (e.g., ambitious), is part of the representation of the white category for our subjects. Response to negative traits showed no significant speed difference after white and black primes. That is, while response to positive traits is relatively slow following a black prime, response to negative characteristics is not relatively quick.

Although it is encouraging to find that associations with blacks are apparently no longer negative, it is important to note that racial bias associated with stereotyping continues to exist. Our findings, in support of Gaertner and McLaughlin's (in press) conclusion, indicate that positive attributes come to mind more quickly when thinking of whites. Thus, racial attitudes have not completely faded; rather, they are more subtle and less overtly negative and are expressed in ways that prevent people from appearing bigoted (see Gaertner & Dovidio, 1981).

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Rosch, E. Cognitive representations of semantic categories. Journal of Experimental Psychology, 1975, 104, 192-233. (b)

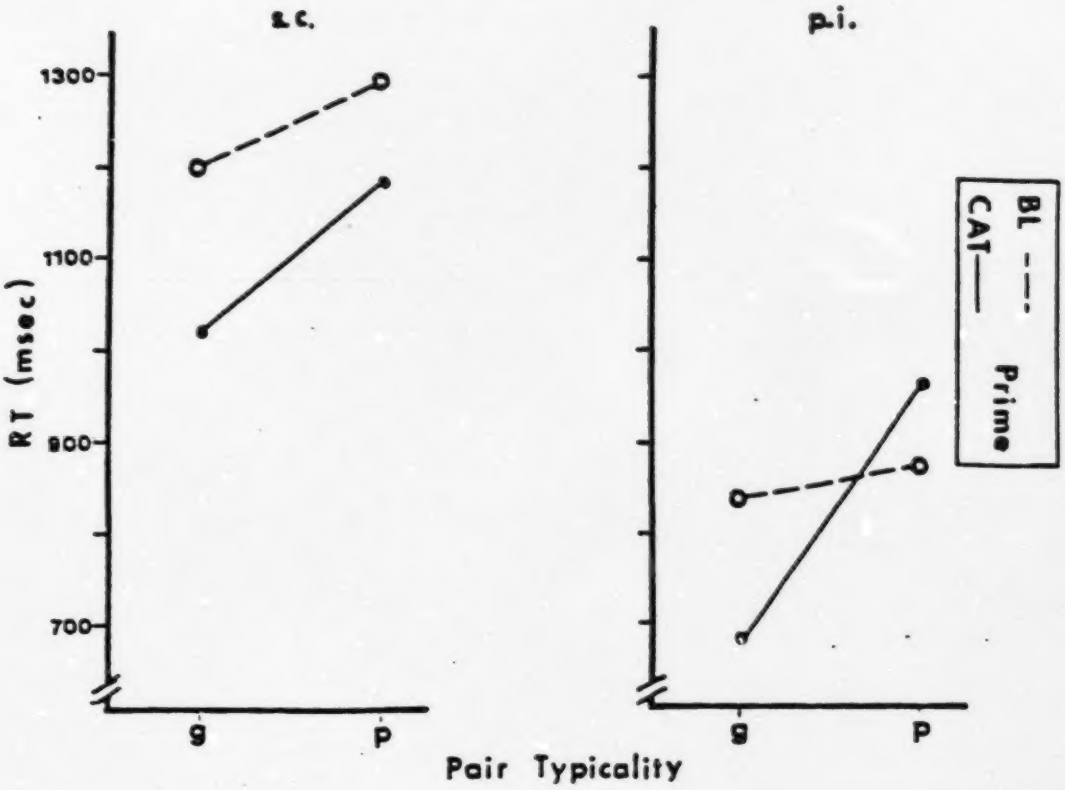

Figure 1. Response times, based on Rosch (1975b), computed for "same" pairs. Responses after the category name (e.g., bird) were faster, relative to responses after a blank "prime," for "good" category members (e.g., robin-sparrow) than for "poor" category members (e.g., ostrich-penguin). Results for same-category (s.c.) pairs appear in the left panel; results for physical-identity (p.i.) pairs appear in the right panel.

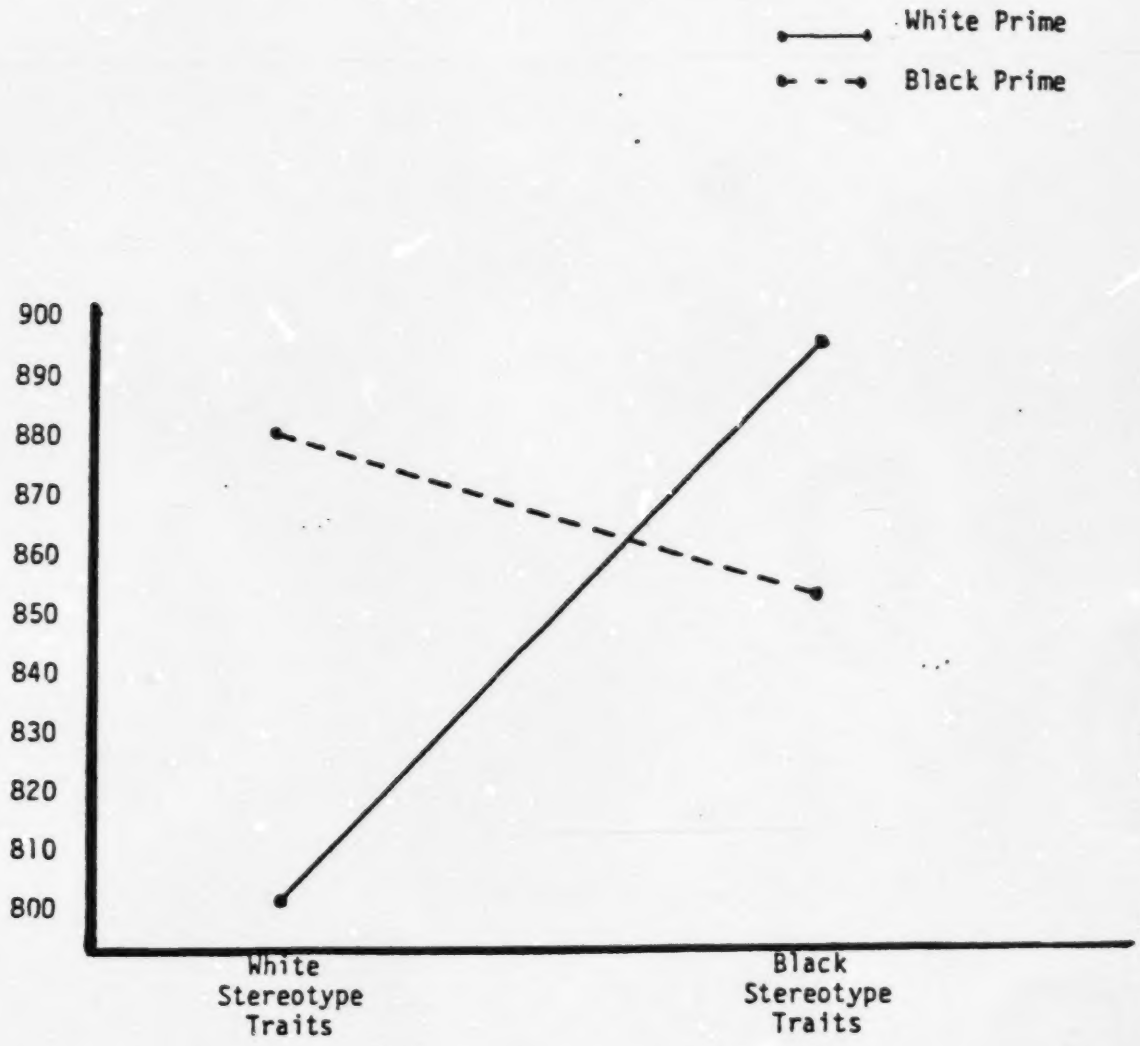

Figure 2. Mean reaction time in milliseconds to white stereotypic and black stereotypic traits after a prime of "white" or "black" (Evans and Dovidio, 1982).

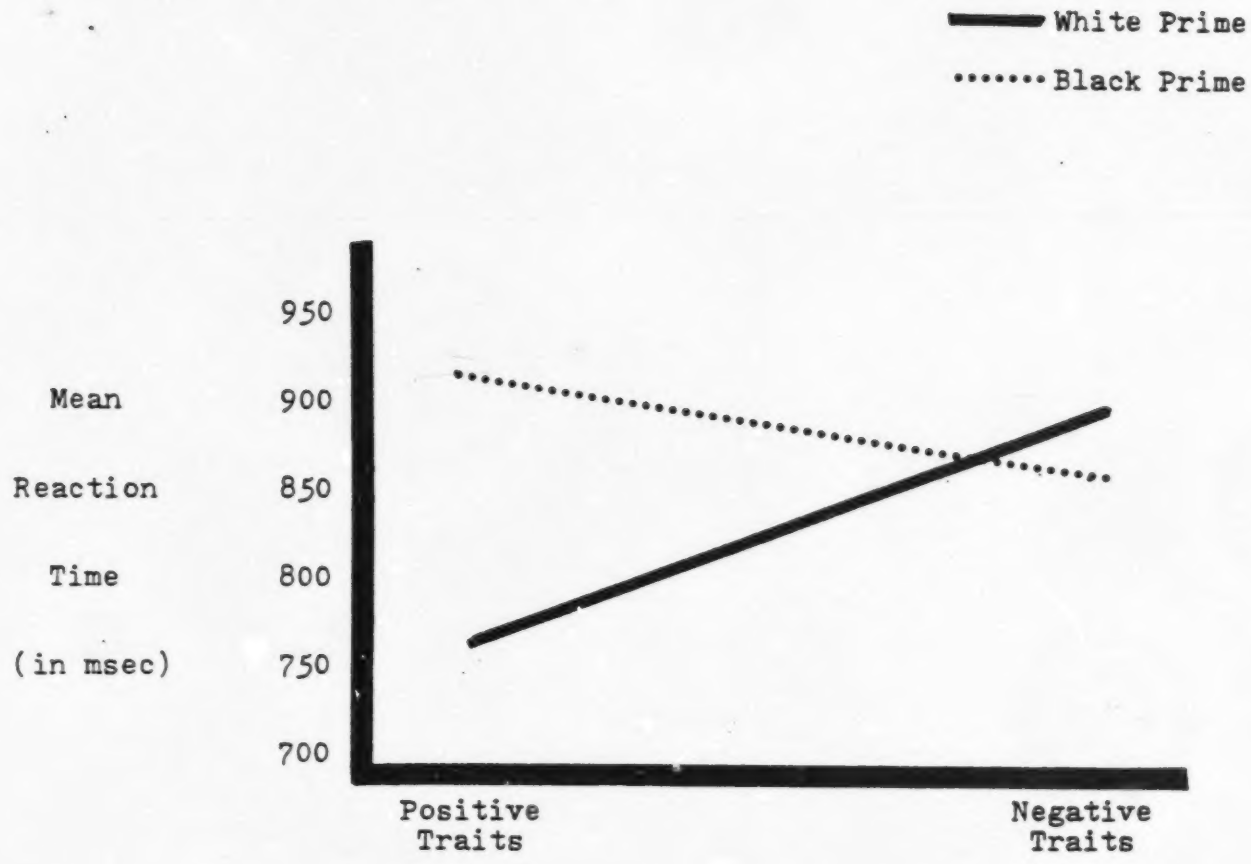

Figure 3. Reaction times to positive and negative evaluative traits following "white" and "black" primes.